

Interviewer: Creston Long

Narrator: Austin Short

Keywords/Phrases: Lumber, Sawmills, Adkins Mill, Workplace Injuries, Forestry

Intro: Austin Short speaks of his memories in the lumber business in the early-mid 20th Century in Southern Delaware.

Creston Long: It is June 6th, 2018, this is Creston Long from the Nabb Research Center conducting an oral history interview in Southern Delaware. So, if you could go ahead and state your name and where you live, we'll go ahead and get started.

Austin Short: I'm Austin Short Jr. From Georgetown Delaware. 88 years old, born and raised here on the farm, and I sorta got interested in forestry some even when I was in elementary school. Come home from school in the winter time, and I said, "Mom, where's dad?" Well, he's in the back, cutting firewood, but I couldn't get my clothes changed fast enough to get back to her to help. So, I got back to her, she got back in time to get going good, but dad said, "well, we've got to quit and go up and feed the chickens and the cows, so..." That was the end of that, but I stayed interested in it. Got what information I could when I was in school, and we had the *American Forest* magazine in the library and I'd read it and in the—I went to NC State for a year and a half, stayed in forestry, and I stopped there, came home and helped dad on the farm, bought a farm right behind his, and it was mostly woodland, but I've managed it ever since and now we have some [quite pretty turns on it.] I was interested in sawmills, they always fascinated me. So, I got to use one back in about '49 or '50. Ran it for a little while just sawing stuff for myself and a little bit of custom sawing. I guess it was in '55, I bought one of those—the last one that was set up for demonstration on Harrison Fairgrounds. I still have it. I've rebuilt it a couple times, but it's still doing a right good job cutting lumber. About two years ago—no, four years ago, I had my second operation for colon cancer and they put me out the operation for the sawmill. So, my son, he volunteered to kind of help out with it. So, he did a real good job. The next year, I turned everything over to him. So, he runs it now. Used to be he helped me, now I help him until right recently. So, he's been doing a good job, business has been building up, he kind of specializes in special stuff; special cuts, some hardwoods, some pine. He specializes a lot in wide-width pine. We would saw some stuff that people would lie for paneling, like in some of the restaurants down in Rehoboth, in the beaches, to make something look rustic. All kinds of stains, stain [worm holes] and knots and so forth. So, we try to make something like that for them. Know a fellow that restores and does repair work at Ross Mansion in Seaford. Of course, he said they were built with 2x4's and you can't find them at the lumber yard. So, he comes here and wants a couple of 2x4's, full-size and all. We specialize in stuff like that. We have a dry kiln now. My son, he's been doing custom docking for people. Had one fellow with a—he's been bringing us quite a bit of cypress, and it's some beautiful cypress. In fact, I think he brought some yesterday. So, stayed interested in it, I've worked in some commercial mills; I've worked in Atkin's mill there in Salisbury for a little over two years.

Creston: When did you work there?

Austin: (Pause) It was the early '60s, I think. Probably '62, '63, '64, somewhere in there. I sawed five years for Joan Connors down in Frankford. He went to Scragg Mill, two saws. I sawed one day a week for him for five years. He and I have been very close friends ever since. I visit other mills, but those are mainly the ones I sawed in, other than my own. So, we kept it that way. Keeps me busy. My son has a full-time job in Dover and he's hoping to retire in about a year or so, maybe, they hope. Then, he can take it over full-time. So, that's about my story on forestry and my interest in it and what I've been doing.

Creston: Okay. So, it sounds like it started at a very young age. You mentioned your father cutting—did you say pine, back in, behind your house?

Austin: He had about 25 acres of woodland and he'd go through there in the wintertime and cut out all the dead stuff and we'd use that for fire wood for heating.

Creston: For firewood, okay. Did he operate a mill?

Austin: No.

Creston: Okay.

Austin: He was involved in forestry through. Except, he did cut a few dead oaks one time, so I was in the sawmill over here a little less than a mile. He took the wagon body off the two-horse wagon, and somehow, he slung the log underneath there like a timber cart, and it didn't have that arched axle. He took it over there and I think it got three or four logs to get sawed for boards for a 50-pound fence and stuff like that. But that's about the only time he was involved with it. But I do remember, when I was probably 8-10 years old, one afternoon, we heard this noise coming through the woods. "What the hell is that?" Seemed like it was taking a long time to get here. It was a traction steam engine. He came around and they set up a mill on the other side of the woods here, right in the corner of the field, and they ran a saw mill with it. One of the first sawmills I saw running. I was fascinated watching it. Steam engines, sometimes, you can dial right down to "tot, tot, tot," and you think they're going to quit but, sure enough, they keep going. It's interesting. I asked a fellow if I could come over and watch, he said, "Yeah, just don't stand in line of the saw, front or back. That would be the danger point. It was interesting, I enjoyed it. I never got back again, but..."

Creston: How big was that? I can't really imagine how large or small that kind of operation was.

Austin: uh... you mean as far as how many men involved?

Creston: Yes.

Austin: Um... there was one fella probably shoveling sawdust, and I think they were probably using sawdust to fire the boiler. Either that or (inaudible), but probably sawdust. I imagine one fella was doing that, then the sawyer, fella on the carriage helping the sawyer, then there's at least one fella with horses and a timber cart bringing logs from the woods up to the mill. Of course, with how a log weighs, they'd drive right up on them, drop the log, drive off, then they'd roll the log down to the mill. Then, there was probably at least two fellas using a crosscut saw cutting timber

in the woods. So, there were two, three, four five six... probably at least six-head, maybe seven.

Creston: And a team like that working with a steam engine, I realize this was a while ago, but how much could they clear? How much timber—how much product could they generate in, say, a couple weeks' time?

Austin: I think the rule-of-thumb for those little mills that moved around was 1000-foot per day per man. You've got a six-man crew, they'd saw 6000 feet, I think. In that ballpark. That's about the only unit of measure for time that I can remember hearing.

Creston: Yeah, that's good, that's helpful. Very good. Is there a general acreage that you can attach to that? I realize there were different trees in the forest, but a team like that to work to get what they wanted from, say, an acre of land, how long would that take?

Austin: How long for them to cut an acre? To timber an acre?

Creston: Mm-hmm.

Austin: Uh, hmm...

Creston: About. I just want an approximate.

Austin: Uh... I would have to guesstimate... well, if they cut 6000 feet a day, and you've got 6-8000 feet per acre, so they probably wouldn't be cutting any more than an acre a day. Something like that, I guess.

Creston: Okay. That seems to me, as a lay-person, that seems like a lot and they would have been working pretty hard.

Austin: Right, they would!

Creston: That is amazing.

Austin: Might even take two days to do an acre.

Creston: Okay. Generally—you mentioned teams of horses, is that...?

Austin: The piece I bought behind dad here had one field in it and a fella bought that in spring—I think March or April of '41. He bought land, timber and all. They went back there and built a little—a shed with a fence around it. They put some team back there and they started cutting pine. They cut pine off of that track of timber for about 100 acres of woodland; for over a year, I think. They cut out the bigger timber and hauled it on a truck into the permanent mill in Georgetown, over there by the water. After they got most of the big timber sawed, they moved the little mill-- like I have-- back there in the corner and powered it with an old Carpenter farm tractor. It was back there probably at least a year and a half or two years. I like them working saws back there too. But at one time, they had 13-head or horses and mules and one pair of oxen back there to log and so forth. The fella that ran the oxen was kinda interesting, an older fella. He'd go back, we'd get a load of logs and be coming across the field toward the mill, and he'd walk ahead of them. He looked like his mind awas 100 miles away. After a while, he'd think of it, stop, turn around and look

and the oxen be 50-70 feet in back of him. He'd stand there waiting until they caught up then he'd go again. (Chuckles) It was interesting watching, but he ran it all day long. Then the men had horses and mules run the timber carts. Then they had a fella in the woods there—when you're cutting up small-diameter timber, he would lay a stick about that big across, then he'd pile a log on top of it to make up a load for the timber cart. They had, usually a mule, and he would really obey commands. A fella would get used to it, he'd just hook the log tongs on the end of a log, tell him "hyup" and the mule would go up there, come around and lay his leg against the log and it would [flop right in the pond], it was neat the way they did it. They would learn after a while of how to do it an easier way and a quicker way, but it was fascinating to watch them. (inaudible) a pro at their work. It's interesting to watch them do it. Whether it's a carpenter or an electrician or whatever.

Creston: Now, with that sort of work, the heavy material and the trees themselves, and the animals and the actual mill itself, there's a bit of danger involved. Were you aware of people being injured or even killed in this work?

Austin: Yes, I know of people who were hurt. I'd never seen one or been around one that was. I know one fella said they started cutting timber on a really windy day. One fella was cutting a tree and it fell faster than he thought it would because the wind pushed it and it pinned this other fella on the ground. I remember the fella said they had to clear-cut an area so the helicopter could land. They said, "Are you hurt?" He said, "No, I'm not hurt," it just had him pinned down. When it got all done and got ready and they cut that tree in two to get it off of him, he said as soon as they took that stick off of him, the pain set in. So, it didn't hurt till then. I don't know if it cut off a nerve that was hurting or what but he said, "It landed and it didn't hurt." Then I've heard of a fella cutting trees one day by himself; he and a friend had been going but the friend couldn't go and he went. The tree fell before he had cut it enough for it to break off and it went to "barber chair"; the end split up and as it split up, it snapped off and jumped over and (clap) clamped on his body like that. It practically killed him instantly. Nobody found him till that night when he didn't come home.

Creston: So, he died?

Austin: Yeah.

Creston: He did, okay.

Austin: One fella used to log for Adkins's company—Ralph Ward, he had two sons along too. But Ralph was a swamp logger, he logged the cypress for him. He loaded logs on a truck. One day, he was standing up on the load getting ready to tie it down or something, he slipped and fell off on the ground. He was out of commission for about a month, then he was out hauling logs again. He survived pretty good. Have you met—did you meet Grant Powell, the forester for Adkins's company?

Creston: I know the name, but no, I have not.

Austin: He can tell you some stories too, I guess, if you caught up with him.

Creston: I'm sure. So, was there a particular season of the year that was better for this kind of work than others or were some of the men on these teams...

Austin: A lot of times, during the winter, they would cut timber because the farmers had the horses they could use. Also, in the summer after they got the corn and crops laid by, from then until harvest time, they had a chance to work with the mules. So, that was the working income for farmers during that season.

Creston: I was wondering. So, they were using their forest land to supplement their agricultural incomes.

Austin: Sometimes they were, yes.

Creston: How much a part of your working career or your livelihood is connected to timber? Was it all or were you...?

Austin: No, I farmed. Combining, corn-picking and hay-baling. The sawmill had been there on standby about all the time. If I wasn't baling hay or working on the farm, I usually had a few logs to saw—somebody would bring them in for custom sawing—and it kept me fairly busy with that. There weren't many such things, I got to saw stuff for myself.

Creston: Now, did you ever do contract work with a large company like Adkins that would sell lots of timber or was it mostly private?

Austin: No, mm-mmm.

Creston: Okay.

Austin: No, a few times I took the lumber down to House and White lumber company down in Millsboro and sold them pine, 2x4 boards. They're the only ones I sold. I did cut pallet lumber for a while. I never sold to anybody building pallets, it was always people who repaired pallets. So, the pallet would come in and one or two boards on the deck was broken, they'd pry them off and put a new one on. That way—you could repair it for a lot less than you could buy a new one. I sawed a couple pallet-lumber off and on for... must've been 12-15 years to it, at least. (inaudible) Odds and ends lumber. If I get caught up, I can cut some scrap trees—crooked, hollow, stuff like that and work it up to pallet lumber. It was a good way to clean up your woods.

Creston: Certainly. Is there a particular kind of wood that is—here, that is more prized than others?

(AUDIO CUTS OFF)